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SUBJECT: GOVERNOR'S PROMOTION SENDS INTERESTING SIGNALS ABOUT

REFERENDUM, SONTHI TIES

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) Chiang Mai Governor Vichai Srikwan's recent promotion to head an important election administration body has caught many observers by surprise. Some of Vichai's Interior Ministry colleagues are reportedly grumbling that he is a bit junior for the job. They, and the press, attribute his promotion to the ties he developed with Council for National Security (CNS) chairman General Sonthi during Vichai's earlier stint as Governor of Lopburi, where Sonthi spent most of his army career. Vichai's appointment belies speculation that senior officials in provinces that rejected the draft constitution in the August 19 referendum - such as Chiang Mai -- would be demoted. End Summary.

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Chiang Mai Governor Promoted . . .  
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¶2. (SBU) On August 28 the Interior Ministry (MOI) announced a surprise promotion for Chiang Mai Governor Vichai Srikwan. Effective October 1, he will be Director General of the Provincial Administration Department (PAD). Vichai was widely expected to be promoted during this fall's reshuffle of senior Interior portfolios (five other appointments were announced the same day), but into a less influential position as Deputy Permanent Secretary.

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. . . To Important Role in December Election  
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¶3. (SBU) Instead, Vichai will head a body that plays an important administrative role in the supervision of national elections. Specifically, the PAD will assist the national Election Commission by providing polling equipment and dispatching officials to help administer the election. Sources say the PAD is also instrumental in local officials' efforts to mobilize voters.

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Friends in High Places?  
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¶4. (SBU) According to a Deputy Governor in neighboring Lamphun, some MOI insiders are grumbling over Vichai's surprise promotion. They feel he is a relative novice, with the Chiang Mai governorship having been his only previous "big" job - whereas past PAD directors had typically previously held deputy permanent secretary jobs. These insiders, and some press reports, assert that Vichai was boosted into his new job by his past connection to CNS Chairman Sonthi. Vichai recently served as Governor in Lopburi, home of the Royal Thai Army's Special

Forces and the place where Sonthi has spent the bulk of his army career. Moreover, Vichai was reportedly more than compliant when Sonthi deployed the Special Forces from Lopburi to Bangkok to spearhead last September's military coup that toppled the Thaksin government.

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Comment  
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15. (SBU) Chiang Mai province voted against the CNS-backed draft constitution by a margin of 55% to 42% during the August 19 referendum - an ironic result for the man tapped for a position of importance during the December parliamentary elections. Vichai's promotion thus belies speculation that senior officials in areas that rejected the draft would be demoted or otherwise punished. The publicly discussed possibility of Sonthi running for a parliamentary seat in Lopburi could be a factor in the surprise appointment. Vichai's promotion might be intended to solidify his loyalty to the CNS leader and in turn fuel his willingness to deploy - for Sonthi's benefit - whatever network Vichai retains in Lopburi.

MORROW